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ABSTRACT

This document contains a short fictional story about a girl who is overwhelmed by mathematics homework, a book report that is due, and family chores that she must complete. The story describes the girl's trip to the zoo with her father and the ways she learned to handle stress by observing the animals. Readers learn about healthy, effective ways to manage stress. (NB)

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An *Actions for Health* Book

Misuk and the Totally Stressed-Out Day

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CONTEMPORARY HEALTH SERIES

Misuk and the Totally Stressed-Out Day

An *Actions for Health* Book

by ETR Associates

ETR ASSOCIATES
Santa Cruz, California
1994

ETR Associates (Education, Training and Research) is a nonprofit organization committed to fostering the health, well-being and cultural diversity of individuals, families, schools and communities. The publishing program of ETR Associates provides books and materials that empower young people and adults with the skills to make positive health choices. We invite health professionals to learn more about our high-quality publishing, training and research programs by contacting us at P.O. Box 1830, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1830, 1-800-321-4407.

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Misuk's Morning Madness

One morning in October, Misuk (Me-sook) woke up feeling tired. She had a headache. The sun was shining and birds were singing, but they didn't make Misuk feel any better.

Misuk lay in bed, thinking about all the things she had to do this weekend. She had five pages of math homework. She had to write a book report, but before she could do that, she had to finish reading the book.

She had to clean her room. And she had to write thank-you notes for all the birthday presents she had gotten last week.

She probably wouldn't have any time all weekend to watch TV or go see her friends. And on top of all these things to do, she had to get her dad to sign her social studies test. She had only gotten a C-minus on the test, and she knew her dad would be disappointed.

It all felt like more than she could handle. Misuk thought about pretending to be sick. Then nobody would bother her. She started to pull the covers over her head. Just then, her dad called, "Misuk, time to get up. I need to talk to you."

Misuk got up and went into the kitchen. She tried to look sick, but her dad didn't get it.

"Misuk, when are you going to get around to mowing the lawn?" he asked.

That did it! Misuk became angry.

"Dad," she said. "I'm not just sitting around doing nothing! I have a lot to do today! Why do I have to mow the lawn? I have math homework and a book report, and I have to clean my room and a whole bunch of other stuff!"

Dad just looked at her.

"Misuk," he said calmly, "mowing the lawn is one of your chores. I'd like you to do it this morning. When you're done, we can have a talk."

Too Much to Do for a Trip to the Zoo

Mowing the lawn seemed to help Misuk calm down a little. Then she went back to the kitchen for breakfast and that talk with Dad.

"So, Dad," she asked, "what did you want to talk about?"

"I was wondering if you could go with me to the zoo for an hour or two this afternoon," Dad said.

"The zoo? Gee, Dad, I have a lot of things to do this weekend. And my head hurts and my stomach hurts...."

"And you're kind of crabby."

Misuk just made a face.

"Listen, Misuk," Dad said. "You seem to be a little stressed out. I know you like the zoo, and I think some of the animals may have a message for you."

Tied Up in Knots

Three hours later, Misuk and her dad were standing in the Reptile House.

"You know, Misuk," Dad said, "these snakes kind of remind me of you this morning."

"Thanks a lot, Dad," Misuk said, feeling a little mad.

"I don't mean they look like you on the outside. But they look like your insides," Dad said.

"What are you talking about?" Misuk asked.

"Look at the python over there, tied up in knots. When you came down this morning you looked like *you* were tied up in knots. Or take a look at the boa constrictor. You know how they kill their food, don't you?"

Misuk nodded her head. "They squeeze their victims to death."

"Well, you kind of looked like you had an invisible boa constrictor tied around your waist."

Misuk couldn't help but laugh. "How could you tell I was stressed out, Dad?"

"Honey, when people are stressed, it's easy to tell," Dad said. "Sometimes they have stomachaches or headaches. Sometimes they're very tired. Sometimes they're grouchy or unhappy."

"Well, actually, I was tired and kind of unhappy," Misuk said. "And I did get angry with you about the lawn. And my stomach sort of hurt."

"Well, Misuk, I think you were feeling some stress."

"But why, Dad?"

"Honey, think about what has happened since you turned ten. You have a lot more work and more things you want to do on your own."

"I sure do have more homework this year. And you expect me to do more stuff around the house," Misuk said. "Plus I'm playing volleyball and soccer. I'm in scouts and choir, too. There's more that I have to do and more that I want to do now."

"Stress is something that everyone feels as they grow older," Dad said. "One big cause of stress is having too much to do and not enough time to do it."

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"Stress can be caused by one real big problem or lots of little problems," Dad added. "Remember when the roof leaked last spring? That caused me some stress!"

"Dad, I'm sure you're right," Misuk said. "But did we come all the way to the zoo just to look at a couple of snakes and for you to talk to me about how stressed out I am?"

"Well, that's only part of it," Dad said. "In small doses, stress can be good. It helps people get things done, and, in a way, it makes life more fun. But when you start to feel stress day after day, week after week, you have a problem. Stress can make you sick. It can wear out your body. It can even affect your immune system. Then when you're exposed to germs, your body isn't able to fight off a disease."

"Dad, I don't mean to be rude, but *really!* I'm only a kid! What am I supposed to do about stress?"

"Well, Misuk, that's why I brought you to the zoo today."

Misuk wondered if Dad was getting goofy now that he was forty.

Animal Messages

The next stop was in front of the kangaroo.

"This kangaroo knows how to reduce his stress," Dad said. "Watch him and see if you can figure it out."

This was pretty dumb, Misuk thought. The kangaroo was only jumping back and forth across the yard.

"I give up, Dad," Misuk said. "How is this kangaroo handling stress?"

"What's he doing?" Dad asked.

"He's just jumping."

"But what is jumping?"

"Jumping is...jumping. Jumping is...moving. Jumping is...activity. Oh! I get it! Jumping is exercise. Does exercise reduce stress?"

"Yes," Dad said. "Didn't you feel better this morning after you had mowed the lawn?"

"Yes, I guess I did," she said.

Misuk and her dad moved on to the birdhouse. The birds lived in a big building with many windows. The birds had lots of room to fly around. Flowers and trees grew inside.

Misuk loved to listen to the birds' songs and to watch them fly. But when Dad asked her why the birds didn't feel any stress, she didn't know.

"Misuk, take a look at this building," Dad said. "What have the zookeepers done to make it a safe and relaxing place for the birds who live here?"

"Well," Misuk said, "they didn't lock the birds up in cages. They have room to fly, and there are pretty trees and flowers all around."

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"Things around us—our environment—can help us deal with stress. These birds have a peaceful environment," Dad said.

"You know my little office in the basement? That's where I relax. When I feel a lot of pressure, I go down there and lock the door. I have a comfortable chair. I take my tape recorder so I can listen to some great music."

"Of course," Dad added, "the birds didn't create this environment. People made it for them. But we can do that for ourselves. We can make or find relaxing places to go to when we feel stressed."

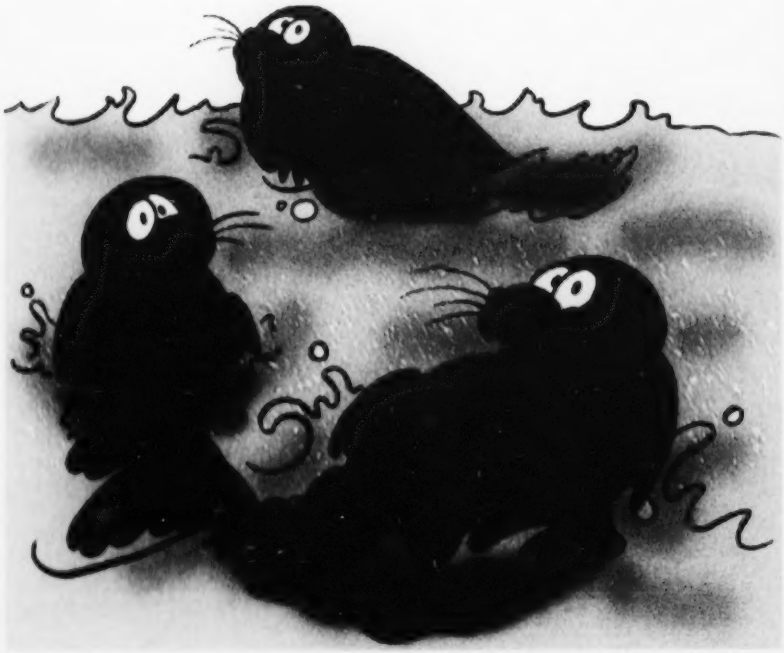
Misuk and Dad moved on to visit the bears. "Dad," Misuk asked, "why do zoos put up signs about not feeding the bears?"

"Animals need different things to eat than we do," Dad explained. "Our human food may not be good for them. The zookeepers feed the bears only foods that are good for them.

"Eating healthy foods is a way that people can keep themselves healthy. Staying healthy helps keep stress from getting the best of you."

They kept moving around the zoo. Misuk wasn't surprised when Dad stopped in front of the seal pool. She could see that these animals knew how to take time to relax.

The seals were just floating on top of the water. They weren't sleeping and they weren't exercising. They were just floating along, having a great old time.



The last stop was the Monkey House.

"Watch these monkeys," Dad said. "You'll see two more great ways to deal with stress."

The monkeys were fun to watch. They were swinging from branches, jumping on each other's backs and throwing things around the cage. Misuk laughed. Suddenly, she thought of something.

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"Is playing with friends a way to take care of stress?" Misuk asked.

"You bet," Dad said. "Do you notice anything about the way these monkeys talk to each other?"

"Well, we don't take monkey language until high school, Dad," Misuk said. "But it does look like those monkeys are having fun and laughing."

"That's it. Laughing is one of the best ways to get rid of stress."

Stress Signals

Misuk and Dad kept talking on their way home.

"Well, Dad," Misuk said, "now when I feel stress, I can act like the animals. I can exercise, go somewhere calm, relax, be with friends or laugh. And eating healthy foods will help keep me from feeling stress."

"That's great, Misuk." Dad said. "Those are all good ways to deal with stress."

"But there's something even more important to know about stress," Dad added. "You need to like yourself, remember the good things about yourself and have confidence in yourself. People who like themselves and have self-confidence deal better with stress.

"Remember your stress signals," Dad said. "When you start feeling unhappy or angry or tired, even after you've had a lot of rest, remind yourself of all the things that are good about you.

"When you do something, and it doesn't turn out the way you hoped, don't say 'I'm bad.' Say 'This is not like me. I usually do better than this.' Does that make sense?"

Misuk nodded.

"So what are you going to do to deal with the stress you've been feeling today?" Dad asked.

"I'll show you as soon as I get home, Dad."

As soon as they got home, Misuk ran to her room. Then she came downstairs holding something behind her back.

Misuk's Plan

"Dad," Misuk said, "the trip to the zoo was very relaxing. I feel calmer and ready to do my math. When I finish math, I'll take a bike ride over to Katie's house. That way I'll get some exercise and spend some time with a friend.

"When I come home, I'll find a quiet corner and finish reading my book. I'll go to bed by 9:30 to make sure I get enough rest. Then I can get up early and do my book report."

Dad smiled. "Well, Misuk. It looks like you have it all under control."

"Well, not really, Dad." Misuk said. "There's one more thing on my mind. We had a social studies test yesterday, and you have to sign it. I only got a C-minus." Then she smiled. "But I know I'm not bad just because I got a C-minus. I usually do better than this."

It was hard to tell who burst out laughing first.

Misuk is stressing out!

This book is about ways to manage stress. Math homework, a book report and family chores feel like more than Misuk can handle! Then her dad suggests a trip to the zoo. What could animals possibly teach Misuk about healthy, effective ways to reduce stress?

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